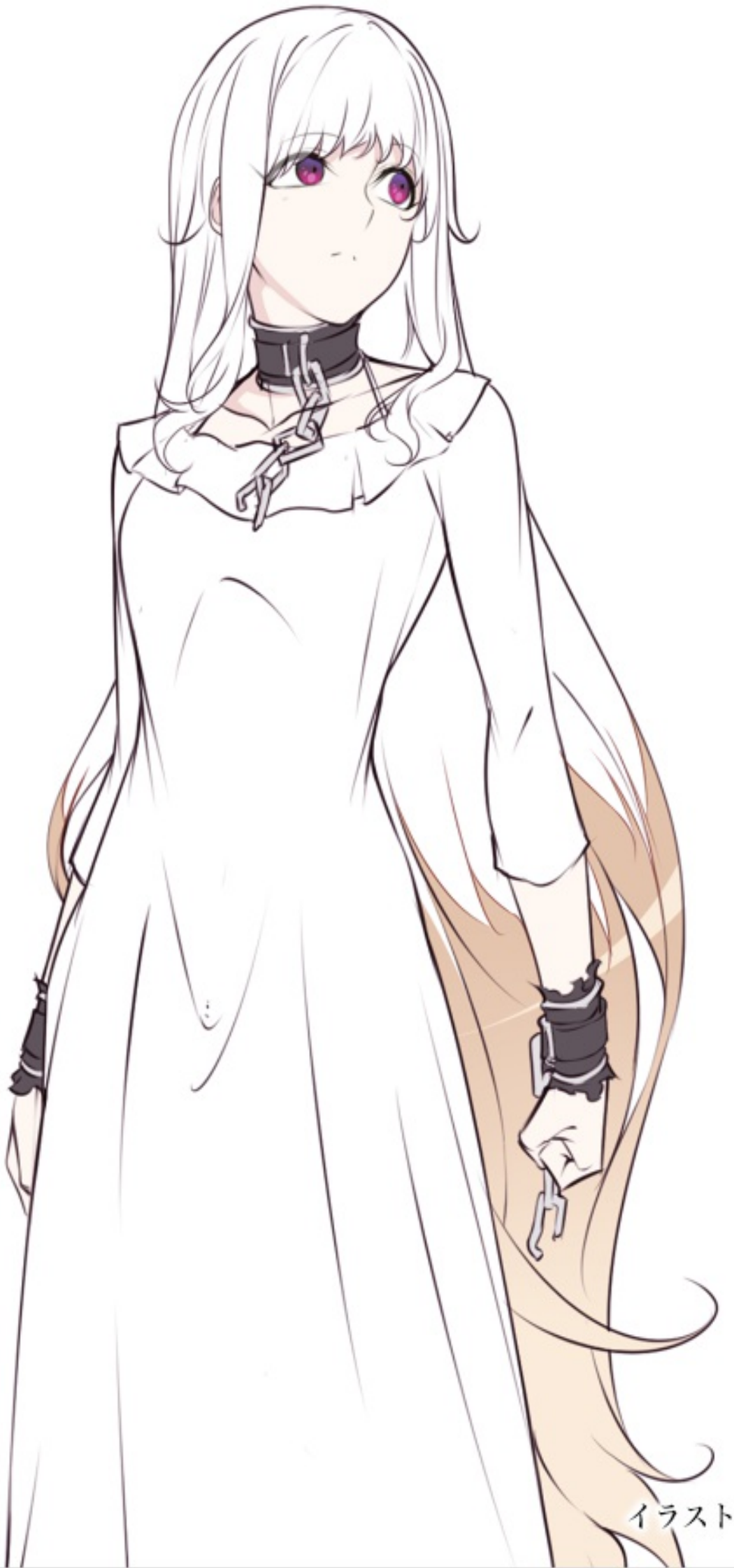

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Hishigami (♀) All Stars Psychedelic Live!!

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Hishigami (♀) All Stars Psychedelic Live!!

Part 1

…*What is going on?*

Below the clear winter sky and surrounded by the smell of gasoline and smoke, I desperately used my aching head to think while clinging to the side of a crushed police car.

I was in Ichigaya.

I was familiar with the landmarks, such as the fishing hole in front of the train station and the branch of a certain TV station, but the most important thing there was the Ministry of Defense facility. The large military antenna tower was visible from anywhere in the area.

A small parade had been scheduled for today. Some newly arrived ambassador was obsessed with the military yet dulled by peace, so he apparently liked to visit military facilities in different countries like a history buff visiting historical sites.

There had apparently been a fair bit of argument over whether the JSDF or the police should be in charge of his protection, but everyone had been quite carefree on the scene. Of course, the only people taking part in the parade were members of the bodyguard division and others who had cleared a strict background check. Plus, the parade was following a prearranged course, so they only had to patrol roads that just so happened to all look the same.

The least important group there was the 0-X Office that specialized in Youkai-related cases. That Office was filled with civilian middle school girls like Mystery Freak Hishigami Enbi and Hachikawa Tomoe. They couldn’t exactly drive a car and I couldn’t recruit civilians for this anyway.

And that’s why I, Uchimaku Hayabusa, was the only member of the 0-X Office on the job.

That was all it was.

I should have only been there for two or three hours.

Should have.

It happened suddenly.

Another group of vehicles charged into the intersection that should have been blocked off.

If it had been an armed group, this would have been a major incident.

But it turned out to be even more of a pain in the ass.

“Dammit. Why did a bunch of JSDF trucks painted in jungle colors crash into us!?”

“They’re not trying to get back at us for taking the bodyguard job from them, are they? And what’s that? A girl!?”

As we hid in the same car together, Sotobori Gaku, the heavy tank of the organized crime division, shouted hysterically.

We were surrounded by a mixture of crushed police and JSDF vehicles.

As everyone aimed their guns at each other from extremely close range, a single conspicuous figure stood in the center.

It was not the ambassador.

It was the girl that Sotobori had mentioned.

She looked like a white witch.

The girl was around eighteen. She has long, rough white hair and an ankle-length outfit that looked like a simplified dress. She had leather belts around her wrists and ankles, short chains, and…softball-sized iron balls?

We were all confused, but the girl gently raised both hands like a conductor and spoke loudly between the two groups.

“You seem quite fixated on me, but isn’t this a dangerous situation!? You will

trigger an international incident, JSDF!!”

“Silence!”

She was answered by the speaker on the roof of one of the military trucks.

The person speaking was a woman who would have looked more at home in an executive secretary’s luxury suit than in camouflage.

“Did you think we would end our pursuit for safety’s sake if you fled into the parade? Or did you think you would trigger a conflict over jurisdiction with the police? We don’t care about any of that! Not if it means letting you escape here, Hishigami Ama!!”

My heart leapt in my chest.

Hishi…gami? Hishigami!? She’s a Hishigami Woman just like Mystery Freak Enbi and the even worse Mai!?

The white-haired girl remained carefree.

“A mass shooting by a rogue JSDF unit? I can’t wait to see the papers tomorrow! No, this would probably warrant a special report. Anyway, are you that worried about staying on the Hishigami Men’s good side? I mean, you are the Hishigami Group’s biggest customer and I should probably be rubbing my hands together in anticipation of your future business with us, but it still saddens me that you would ignore the everyday people to do a company’s dirty work!”

“This has nothing to do with Hishigami!”

“That doesn’t matter. And sorry, but I can’t let myself be captured here. Especially by someone involved with the Men. So I think I’ll make a bit of a mess of things here. Specifically…I’ll get some help from a police officer who’ll actually fight for the common man!”

I exchanged a shocked look with Sotobori.

“Hey, this ain’t good. I don’t know what’s going on, but she’s coming this-… gwoh!?”

“Sotobori!?”

What!? What just happened!?

The white witch should still have been a long way off, but the next thing I knew, white cloth was fluttering before my eyes and that heavy tank with some rank I'd forgotten in judo had been tossed aside and dazed.

And this was when we were holding our guns!

"Don't…move!!"

"Stop it, stop it, stop it."

It was as easy as taking candy from a baby.

I was on the receiving and not even I could tell what had happened. She easily took the gun from my hands and put my arm in a joint lock behind me with a single hand. *She can move like this with those iron balls on her legs!? Dammit!*

She pressed up against my back, presumably to use me as a shield.

I felt something soft on my back and her sweet breath reached my ear.

"If all you can do is fire at paper targets underground with earplugs in, then go have some fun in Guam. This doesn't suit you, detective."

"Dammit. Are you a Hishigami more like Mai than like Enbi!?"

"Oh, you know our name? And it didn't fill you with fear. I find that 'hope' very interesting."

The police and the JSDF both focused their guns in this direction.

Hishigami Ama smiled as she used me as a shield and pressed my gun against my back.

"Stop it. You have me completely surrounded, so firing will only lead to friendly fire. You belong to different organizations, but you're both working toward the peace of this country, right? That sad ending wouldn't suit you!"

"Gh! It's your fault it's turning out that way!"

"Pipe down, detective. Just so you know, this is meant to help all of you."

"You have until the count of ten," said the JSDF official.

"They're ready to do this. And! Do you really think I'd let go of my hostage in such a juicy situation!?"

“He is a public servant. It is his duty to sacrifice himself for social stability.”

Bff!?

“Do all of you have issues!? You all stand out so much the VIP ambassador is fading into the background!”

“I know what you mean. And I have no time to play along with their bluff.” Hishigami Ama whispered to me. “My true pursuers will be here soon.”

It happened a moment later.

“It” arrived.

Part 2

It was like a meteor strike.

With an explosive sound, a nearby police car was crushed before violently exploding. The same happened to a JSDF truck soon thereafter. The JSDF official quickly tried to retreat, but she was knocked out by the blast.

But what in the world was happening?

I looked up into the sky as Hishigami Ama twisted my arm and something blotted out the sun.

There were a few objects in the blue sky.

They were…

“What!? Concrete!?”

“Didn’t you know? A tornado can throw building materials with lengths of a few thousand meters right up into the air. And of course, what goes up must come down. With plenty of help from gravitational acceleration, a single pachinko ball can be deadly. So get down.”

More and more heavy sounds rang out.

Each time, I felt a squeeze at my heart.

I could see something like a muddy gray pillar moving between the buildings in the distant sky. *Don't tell me that's a tornado?*

"The legend of a Tengu's fan was probably used to artificially create a tornado. I'm guessing this was Shitsu's doing. She says she destroys education, but she uses the legend of Ushiwakamaru."

It was all too fragile.

Both the police and the JSDF had been using the vehicles as shields. So now that those shields were being crushed one after another, there was nothing they could do. Unable to maintain any form of leadership, they could only scatter in every direction.

"I always tell her not to do that since it isn't all that accurate. …Now, detective, what will you do?"

"What…?"

"A few other Hishigami Women are after me. Your poor colleagues will be in danger if I don't leave here. You don't want to let me go, but that just means you have to go with me."

"…"

"And more importantly, wasn't your job here to protect that ambassador from wherever? Based on your behavior, you're not part of the bodyguard division, but that doesn't mean you want to abandon your duty, does it?"

Dammit.

I had no choice. Sotobori was still in a daze, I had no idea where the ambassador had ended up, and she had me in an armlock.

"Fine. Let's go with that."

"I will praise you for the quick decision, Detective Uchimaku. But you need to pay closer attention."

"Ah! That's my police badge!"

The white witch let go of my arm and tossed me my badge and gun.

I was shocked.

I had assumed she would keep the gun for herself.

“Are you sure?”

“You can’t kill me with that. You can’t use it to kill the other Hishigami Women either.”

Ama’s white head shook.

A moment later, I heard an incredible explosion and a fist-sized hole appeared in the police car door.

“What…is it now!? Sniper fire!? Is it the JSDF!?”

“The sound didn’t clue you in? They wouldn’t use an antique like the 1941. One of the others is here already. More importantly, you need to run. Follow me. Unless you plan to take on an anti-tank rifle with that revolver.”

Everything about this was a complete mess.

The tornado was still going strong and now a large sniper rifle was firing at us. We were being pursued by two different assassins.

I could only run through the chaos while making sure I didn’t lose sight of Hishigami Ama’s back. She had iron balls attached to her ankles, but I couldn’t catch up. My legs nearly froze up from the occasional sounds of destruction pursuing us, but stopping was not going to improve the situation. A police car wouldn’t block a bullet like that. It would blow a hole in both the car and me.

“Hah hah! Can you believe this, Detective Uchimaku!? We’re being shot at with a gigantic rifle that blew holes in tanks seventy years ago! Can’t you feel the history!?”

“Shut up, you freak! What the hell is that!?”

“Yuu who Destroys Systems. As you can see, she’s a brawny combat type that’s obsessed with weird old Soviet weapons. Shitsu does some more general damage and Yuu finishes us off. That’s their impudent idea of teamwork.”

The dark smoke from the exploding vehicles may have worked in our favor.

We left the destroyed vehicles and arrived at a police car that was somehow

still in a workable state.

I grabbed the driver's side door, but only received a solid sensation. *Oh, damn. They actually bothered to lock it!*

I slammed my elbow into the window, but it didn't even crack.

"It's bulletproof!? Curse the parade specifications. My elbow's tingling!!"

"We don't have time to mess around. Yuu will shoot us. So excuse me a moment."

She had said I needed to pay closer attention.

Even so, I couldn't help but stare in shock when she smoothly removed my tie.

What happened next was an even greater shock.

She stabbed with it.

Ama swung the tie and stabbed it into the gap next to the car door. Then she pulled it straight down and I heard the internal latch breaking.

You're kidding, right?

She smashed it…like with an axe?

The white witch then popped open the door.

"You can have this back. What's that curious look for? A single hair is enough to kill a tiger, right? And a tie is far better than a hair."

"No, wait. How much of an expert are-…!?"

"We can talk later. Or do you want to get hit by that 1941? C'mon, get in, get in!"

Before I could say anything more, she kicked me into the driver's seat. Then she climbed in.

And sat right on my lap.

"Are you just messing with me!?"

"I don't have time to circle around to the passenger seat. We need to drive off like this."

“Traffic laws!”

“I don’t recall any laws against driving while sitting in a man’s lap.”

I don’t even care anymore…

When I just about stopped caring what happened, Ama used her bare hand to smash the ignition below the steering wheel.

“This should be fun. I’ve always wanted to hold a steering wheel.”

“I care again! You mean you don’t even have a license!?”

But if we stuck around for too long, we would be hit by that Hishigami Yuu person’s 1941.

We really did end up driving off in a bizarre Nininbaori style.

…Driving on public roads like this has got to be a yellow light for my life as a detective.

“Okay, let me introduce myself, Favorite-kun. I’m Ama, Hishigami Ama. I’m 18, I’m female, and I have no education history. I’ve never been to a school. Yeah, that goes against my duty as a citizen. People call me ‘Ama who Destroys Hope’. Whether you’re an individual or a group, bring it on. Nice to meet you.”

“You keep changing what you call me, but I’m Uchimaku Hayabusa. And that introduction doesn’t explain anything! What is going on!?”

Part 3 (3rd person)

On the roof of a building near Ichigaya’s Ministry of Defense facility, a woman in a bikini top and skinny pants lay face-down on the thick military coat laid out below her. She sounded exasperated as she spoke into a cellphone.

She was Hishigami Yuu.

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear. This might be bad. The target is active. I repeat, the target is active.”

She was not sunbathing out of season.

She calmly held a 1941, an anti-tank rifle around two meters long.

She was answered by the innocent voice of a ten-year-old girl.

“Were you really trying to hit her?”

“Of course I was. Why would I hold back? But this is Ama we’re talking about. It’s hard to aim for her with the way she staggers around!”

“What about the Nopperabou included in the sniping unit? If you use its power to enchant your opponent, can’t you make any opponent stand stock still for two seconds?”

“No, no. Didn’t I just say this is Ama? She’d use it against me.”

“Hmm. Then you should have shot that detective in the leg so she had to carry him around.”

“If I did that with this 1941, it’d be like shooting a red water balloon. And…”

“And?”

“…I don’t really like shooting that kind of hot-blooded guy.”

She heard a giggle from over the phone.

The beautiful woman in a bikini top quickly stood up.

“H-hey! I’m talking about the *kind noise*!”

“That’s fine. But we can’t let Ama-chan escape. You need to continue the pursuit, Yuu-chan.”

“Okay, but I can’t pursue someone in a car. Jumping from building to building as a shortcut can only take me so far.”

“Don’t worry about that. A few of the others are on the move to keep them in place. Like Rou-chan, and Arawa-chan, and Raku-chan…”

“That’s just playing dirty.”

“And since I don’t want anyone accusing me of being all talk, I’ll be heading out too.”

“Vweh!?”

“What?”

“W-well… Ah ha ha. I-is this really worth having you head out there? I need to give this my all!”

“I’m heading out because I’m worried the rest of you aren’t going to be enough. See you there. Vee.”

“Ah, wait!? …She hung up.”

With that surprised comment, the beautiful woman scratched her head.

She grabbed the military coat she had been lying on and draped it over her shoulders.

“ ‘Yume who Destroys Ethics’ is seriously going to make an appearance? Is this the end for Tokyo?”

Part 4

I used the surviving police car to take Hishigami Ama away from the scene of confusion in order to protect the ambassador and my colleagues, but another problem soon showed itself.

“Whoa!?”

I slammed on the brakes.

The next intersection was filled with people. It was like accidentally driving toward a scramble crossing, but the light was green for cars. As I stared in confusion at the one or two hundred people crammed into the intersection, the “answer” slammed into the windshield.

It was not that the commotion we were leaving had caused a panic.

They were glittering gold…coins?

I had never seen coins that color or size.

“Those are Olympic gold medals. Each one is worth a little less than ten thousand yen. I believe they’re worth more than they should be for their gold content.”

Ama analyzed the golden hail and gave the horrifying answer from my lap.

When I looked out again, I could see them pouring down like a light rain. A single bolt could be deadly if it fell from a building rooftop, but everyone was spreading their arms to catch these. Passersby were fighting over the gold medals scattered across the ground.

And Hishigami Ama kept her lips moving as she sat in my lap.

“That means this must be ‘Rou who Destroys Finances’. Using a mere million yen to clog up one of Tokyo’s arteries and cause more than five billion yen in economic losses is exactly her way of doing things. …And I bet these are the ‘leaf coins’ that Tanuki and Foxes like so much. Truly awful.”

“Wait a second. Don’t tell me the other roads will be blocked too…”

“I see no reason why they wouldn’t be. It’s time to get out. If we stay here, Soviet-obsessed Yuu will start shooting at us again. Luckily, there’s a crowd we can slip into.”

I didn’t try to argue.

We opened the driver’s side door which we had never properly closed and rushed out. We weaved through the crowd and between the cars as we walked.

“What do we do now? If cars are out, then the train? Where’s the ZR!?”

“Wait. The platform area is pretty noisy.”

“What is it now!? There’s trouble there too!?”

“It sounds like that doping-lover Raku. ‘Raku who Destroys Health’. I don’t want to get anywhere near there. She tends to go a little nuts with the camellia that symbolizes both long life and approaching death. Who knows what she can cause just by placing a single meaningful flower on the platform.”

Ama’s annoyed voice did not stop there.

“By the way, Raku specializes in disguises and disturbance tactics, so be

careful. …After all, she's an indoor type who never really exercises, yet she has less than 3% body fat. Just by adding padding in her clothing, she can give herself whatever body type she wants."

"Th-then what about the subway!?"

I quickly changed direction toward the stairway down from the sidewalk.

But a moment later, my sense of time was blown away.

Something waited for us below those stairs.

I felt like my entire soul would be taken away.

According to a semi-serious science paper, humans could not relax when faced with things on an unfamiliar scale. For example, people might want a dessert so large they could never eat it all or to watch a swimsuit model video on a gigantic home theater screen, but if they actually came across those things, their mind was unable to keep up and they felt fear.

It was like facing a giant swarm of wriggling insects or standing in front of a giant salivating mouth.

Some kind of sweet aroma wafted out from the giant maw that was the subway entrance.

But the quantity and density were simply too great.

It's…too much…!?

"Oooeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

I could not bear it.

I lowered my head, bent my body, and found myself vomiting on the sidewalk.

"Hm, hm, hm. Hm, hm, hm. Hm, hm, hm, hm, hm☆"

I heard an innocent girl's voice.

But my vision was blurred by tears and I couldn't see anything.

Who was it?

Who was there?

" 'Yume who Destroys Ethics.' She's probably used a Gaki or a Hidarugami to

create a space of desire so thick it might as well be on the verge of a dust explosion. Drop a single bread crumb and people will start fighting over it. When a Gaki tries to eat something, it burns before their eyes and yet they continue to seek after more food. That means this is probably based on light, perhaps from the victims' smartphone and cellphone screens. …*This time*, the intense desire she created is probably hunger. Anyway, their phones are flashing in a way that induces that desire. And she really plays dirty since she alone remains unharmed within that hellish scene."

Ama rubbed my back as she explained.

Even that white witch said this was "playing dirty".

"The subway is out too. C'mon, stand up. If you don't, Yume will consume you."

"Wait a second… Ugh. We can't just leave those people down in the subway…"

"For the most part, Yume won't kill. After all, death will free them from their desires. Although whether heaven or hell waits them in the afterlife is up to their own values. Of course, some of them will probably get carried away by the extreme situation and happily decide to fulfill all of their desires."

She practically had to drag me away as we started running again.

How many more Hishigami Women were there around here?

I shook my confused head and asked a question while gasping for breath.

"Can we really…escape?"

"I can only think of one way."

"?"

"We walk," smoothly answered Hishigami Ama. "It sounds surprising, but it's true. Tokyo is full of security cameras these days and they can apparently track their target from their walking pattern and the color palette of their face even if they can't get a straight-on shot of the face, but that means you can trick them if you know what matters. Plus, Rou and Raku have created a flood of normal people to stop the cars and support the sniper. So we just need to focus on how we walk, keep our heads down to cast a shadow on them, and try not to stand

out. Just stick with the fleeing crowd and we can escape this hell.”

Part 5

I had no idea if we had safely escaped or if our pursuers were simply letting us go free for the time being, but Hishigami Ama went over some kind of checklist and then sighed in relief.

“Looks like we made it just fine.”

“…Oh, is that so?”

“That means their next step will be to search through anywhere I might try to stay.”

“Where is your home?”

“I don’t have one. And we couldn’t go there even if I did. They’ll be watching your home too, Favorite-kun.”

“Then what about a hotel or inn?”

“They’d find us if they checked the guest register or the security cameras. ‘Arawa who Destroys Birth’ is a cyber war expert, so that monster can break into defense industry production lines and intentionally create countless defective products. Searching out a specific person would be a piece of cake for her.”

“The defense industry…wait a second.”

“I’m serious. She places the power of a Youkai called a Nurikabe into the server she’s using, so you could call her an expert at stopping the flow of information. Instead of infiltrating the target server herself, she cuts off their security and firewall to lock up and neutralize their system. Only the most bizarre of defense systems can even start to defend against it. And government offices are always several steps behind in technology, so they don’t stand a chance.”

“Then what do we do? Internet cafes and the like have cameras and you’d

stand out too much if you tried to live in a cardboard box below a bridge.”

I wasn’t going to say that no young women lived on the streets, but it was true that they were an overwhelmingly small percentage of the homeless.

“I have an idea. There’s one place that allows fake names on the guest register, avoids using security cameras due to the nature of the business, and is even reasonably priced.”

“What is it? Where is this convenient place?”

I was dubious such a place existed, but Hishigami Ama replied with a mischievous look in her eyes.

“They’re everywhere, aren’t they? I’m talking about love hotels.”

Part 6

It was early afternoon.

I really didn’t want to mention where I was.

“…”

“Oh, the bed’s pretty normal. How boring. I was hoping to see one of those rotating ones.”

“＿＿＿＿”

“But the shower room’s wall is entirely made of glass. How refreshing. You can see everything.”

My mouth formed a small triangle as I watched the excited white witch’s back.

This was necessary to protect ourselves.

Oh, but still!!

I considered contacting Enbi or Tsumada Mio from the 0-X Office to tell them I was okay and to ask what had happened to Sotobori and the others. Most of all,

I wanted some backup…but I couldn't. My life would be over if I called a group of civilian middle school girls to a place like this!!

"Sorry, but let me take a shower first. To be honest, I worked up quite a sweat running away from the JSDF and I'm worried about all that smoke I was running through. So now that there's a shower right here, I just can't restrain myself. What do you know, I'm more girly than I thought."

"Wait! Didn't you just say the wall is made of glass!?"

"Watch or look the other way; the choice is yours. I just can't wait any longer."

She really did start stripping off her dress-like outfit, so I quickly turned 180 degrees around.

But I didn't hear the door opening and closing or the water running.

Then she embraced me from behind.

Slender arms wrapped around my neck and a soft sensation reached my back while the breath on my ear sent a tingle down my spine.

"Wait! What are you-…!?"

"You sure are careless taking your eyes off of a Hishigami Woman."

"…"

While most likely naked, Ama gently bit at my earlobe and then continued speaking.

"Of course, my judgment of that changes entirely depending on whether it's a sign of carelessness or trust, so I'll wait to make that judgment until later. Good luck, young man, my heart is right 'here'."

I could hear her pulse as she whispered to me and then the mass of warmth left my back. This time she really did open and close the glass door to the shower room. The wall must have been quite thin because the sound of the water was not muffled at all.

Were all the Hishigami Women exhibitionists and very open about sex?

No.

It may have been that they didn't know how to have a normal relationship, so

they wanted to force a connection with the people they didn't want to be separated from. I could see occasional hints of that with Enbi too.

Excessive energy.

Unnecessary physical contact.

It was like the inability to see the invisible bonds left them uneasy, so they wanted something physical.

How did Hishigami Ama see me?

What category was she going to file me under?

"Sorry about the wait."

The water stopped running and I heard the door opening and closing. Assuming I could finally rest easy, I turned around and found Ama with wet hair and only wearing a towel.

"Bff!? What are you doing!?"

"Sorry, sorry. I forgot about needing a change of clothes. There was a mini-laundromat with the vending machines out front, right? Can you stop by there before taking your shower? I'm really sorry about this."

It seemed to really be an honest mistake.

There was no use crying over spilt milk and I did understand not wanting to put on sweaty clothes after taking a bath.

But for now, I wanted information.

There was a lot I wanted to ask about again.

"I have some questions."

"What, are you going to tie me to a chair and pretend to torture me? I do think there was rope for that sort of thing in the closet. There was also a leather outfit with belts to adjust the size if you're into that Western-style stuff."

"…"

"C'mon, don't fall silent like that. Okay, I get it! I'll take this seriously, so stop pulling out that rope!"

Hishigami Ama sighed and let her butt sink down into the bed.

“So what do you want to know?”

“Everything. From the beginning.”

“Sigh.”

The white witch scratched at her wet hair.

“You can believe me or not, but don’t start voicing your disbelief after everything I say. You can ask all your questions after I’m done. Is that okay?”

“As long as you’ll tell me what’s going on.”

“Then let me start with the basic assumptions here. The JSDF was pursuing me. They haven’t even received a request for a public security operation, so they’re doing so illegally. And I couldn’t let them capture me. That’s why I ran into the middle of that parade. I wanted to take advantage of the confusion.”

“But this is really about a clash between the Hishigami Women, right? Or are you saying they’re helping the JSDF?”

“This all started elsewhere. There’s another reason why ‘we’ are trying to kill each other.”

She crossed her legs while sitting on the bed.

“By the way, how much do you know about the Hishigami family, Favorite-kun?”

“They’re Japan’s largest corporate group and one of the largest in the world. But they’re also Enbi’s family.”

Ama smiled a little.

It was the reaction of an adult who was asked if Santa Claus really existed.

“What do you know about the Hishigami Men and Hishigami Women?”

“Only a bit I’ve heard here and there. I don’t know the details.”

“I have to start from there? What a pain. I’m impressed you get along so well with Enbi and Mai when you know so little. No, maybe they can relax more because you don’t know much.”

The white witch continued while using a hand to fan her towel-covered chest.

“The Hishigami Men are a sign of static gathering. In the terms of the normal world, they perfectly fit the image of the old zaibatsu-style corporation known as the Hishigami Group. As long as it falls within the bounds of normal, average, and reasonable, they will ally with it to spread their connections and create a giant organization. From our point of view, they’re monsters who have gone insane in a ‘normal’ way.”

“The Hishigami Women tend to be referred to in a more dangerous way.”

“You should know why if you’ve seen Mai and Enbi.”

Ama laughed and crossed her legs again.

“The Hishigami Women are a sign of active parting. In other words, we create cracks in the giant organization and lead the clogged-up system to destruction. So to people who live peaceful lives thanks to that giant’s protection, we can easily look like the seeds of disaster.”

“…”

“But we aren’t good or evil. During times of chaos, the Hishigami Men gather people together into a giant system. During times of decline, the Hishigami Women destroy the rotten system to air it all out. That’s all it is. Of course, the Hishigami Men aren’t exactly going to like that,” said Ama. “The Hishigami Women’s traits, such as destroying hope or destroying finances, make sense in that context. What is needed to break apart a giant organization that stretches across all industries and employs over 200 thousand people? The Women of this age have sniffed out our own answers and mastered them. In a different age, such as when the Men’s system was the samurai clans of the Warring States period, the Women would have taken a different form. Perhaps we would have destroyed blacksmithing, salt panning, or annual taxes.”

Basically, they were experts who dragged down the entire Hishigami Group, division by division.

What would happen if someone like that was sent in to deal with an incident caused by an individual?

If this was true, it would explain why they were so extraordinary.

“Raku who Destroys Health and Arawa who Destroys Birth, huh?”

“Those apply pretty obvious damage to a corporation, especially when ‘birth’ includes ‘production’. Ones like Yume who Destroys Ethics and Shitsu who Destroys Education are a little less obvious, but their effect is huge when it reaches the surface. Those affect the skill-level and morals of the workers, after all. And the problem is far more deeply-rooted than having foreign objects mixed into the production line.”

“…”

Yume.

Yume who Destroys Ethics.

“What? Did the idea of destroying ethics make you think of something dirty?”

“N-no! Not really…”

“She isn’t that nice. She’ll do whatever it takes to destroy corporate ethics and morals, but it can be so inefficient.”

“I get the idea behind the Hishigami Women. Setting aside whether it’s really possible, I get the concept. So let’s get back to my first question. Why were you running from the JSDF at Ichigaya and why are the other Hishigami Women after you?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s enough background information.”

Ama toyed with her wet hair.

“Simply put, the Hishigami Men and Hishigami Women are constantly at odds. And a group led by Hishigami Yume is on the verge of a certain breakthrough.”

“A breakthrough?”

“A method of overthrowing the Hishigami Men and thus eliminating the old zaibatsu-style corporate group that supports this country. You could say it will drive 150 million people to bankruptcy in an economic collapse greater than the bubble bursting.”

I was speechless.

The bath towel witch giggled when she saw my mouth moving wordlessly.

“But I want to protest this. If that new age arrives, the Hishigami Women will naturally destroy everything. To air everything out, you see. But it isn’t time for that yet. The Hishigami Group is still necessary. Forcing its destruction would be like prying open a butterfly’s chrysalis. Yume and the others are leaving the proper path of the Hishigami Women.”

“How certain of this are you? Do they really have a way of dragging down the Hishigami Group!?”

“Not yet. But they will if they aren’t stopped.”

“How!? I’ll admit you have extraordinary power, but you’re just individuals, right? I can’t imagine there’s a way to defeat a giant corporation that’s planted its roots all around the world!”

“Hm, you need to think about Hishigami more as a family for this. You need to keep it simple, so set aside the national and world economy for the time being. If you just focus on the conflict between the Hishigami Men and Hishigami Women, it’s simple.”

“?”

I still looked puzzled, so Hishigami Ama sighed.

“Listen. I’ll dumb this down for you. The pieces on the game board only come in two colors: Hishigami Men and Hishigami Women. So what do you need to mess with if you’re going to destroy the very foundation of the board game?”

“Just tell me the answer.”

“What an impatient man. …It’s simple: just mix together the Men and Women pieces.”

At that very moment, a soft knock came to the door.

I tensed and focused on the handgun in my pocket, but Hishigami Ama cheerfully stepped down from the bed.

“It’s fine. She’s on our side.”

She unlocked and opened the door in nothing but a towel to reveal a woman with long hair. The sexy woman wore the kind of hakama worn by female students and university graduates during the Meiji period. I could see some

resemblance to Mai and Enbi, but she looked far gentler.

She carried a large box elegantly wrapped in cloth. I guessed it was a large lunchbox.

I wondered if it was a late lunch, but the digital display on the bedside stereo said it was already evening and nearly night. It was hard to tell without a window, but we had apparently been speaking for quite a while.

“Honestly, why aren’t you wearing any clothes? Oh, dear. You have a gentleman with you!? Then that towel is truly inappropriate!”

Ama introduced the gentle woman who covered her mouth with a hand to express shock.

“She’s a Hishigami Woman just like me. She’s ‘Kuji who Destroys Trust’.”

“I-I see.”

“She used to be a Hishigami Man, but she had a sex change done and has forcefully joined our ranks.”

“Bff!?”

I spat out the contents of my mouth and Ama seemed to enjoy my reaction.

“Are you familiar with the Youkai known as a Mermaid? How they’re depicted in Japanese legends changed quite a bit as time passed. At first, they were a lot like a giant salamander, but they eventually became a fish with a human head. And by the end of the Edo period, they had become the familiar image of a beautiful girl with a fish tail for a lower body. She incorporated that change into her surgery. Of course, if it can turn a giant salamander into a beautiful girl, it can do just about anything. …And if it was originally a giant salamander, there had to be less noticeable changes to the lower body in addition to the obvious ones on the upper body.”

Meanwhile, Hishigami Kuji started blushing.

“I can’t believe you, I can’t believe you. Why would you out me like that in front of a gentleman who isn’t prepared to accept it like normal? And about my lower body too!? I can’t believe you, I can’t believe you, I can’t believe you!!”

It looked like she was comically hitting her sister with her clenched fists, but I

could hear dull crushing and breaking sounds coming from Ama. Did she have something hidden in the sleeves of that Japanese clothing? Was it like hitting someone with a bag full of bottles and cans? Or like a morning star!?

“U-ugh. Can you forgive me yet, Kuji? I haven’t actually altered my body like Mai, so I’ll die like normal if you keep hitting me like that… Although being killed by an ally does seem like a Hishigami Woman way to die.”

“Ah!? I’m so very sorry. How could I behave so inappropriately in front of a gentleman!?”

Someone nearly died in their noncompliant little skit, but they seemed to have gotten back on track.

“What was it you were about to say before? It was something about mixing up the Hishigami Men and the Hishigami Women. What does that have to do with Hishigami Yume’s plan?”

“We have living proof right here you can go from the Men to Women.”

“Oh, honestly.”

Hakama-wearing Kuji puffed out her cheeks and Ama held her hands out to stop her. She looked fairly desperate to stop her.

“So couldn’t it go the other way? In other words, change from a Hishigami Woman into a Hishigami Man.”

“…”

“If that worked, they could freely enter the Hishigami Group and contaminate it from within. And if they even managed to obtain the ability to form static gatherings, it would give birth to an unprecedented sort of Hishigami. This wouldn’t be a single-generation mutation either. They could eternally create more of themselves to stably increase the numbers of Hishigami Women. This threat goes beyond ‘Ama who Destroys Hope’ or ‘Yume who Destroys Ethics’. In the worst case, it could create the worst possible Hishigami Woman who surpasses even Enbi or Ou. In fact, it might not even be contained to a single individual.”

It didn’t sound real.

It wasn’t grounded.

But what if it was possible?

What would happen to Tokyo if a hundred or a thousand versions of Hishigami Ama or Hishigami Yume attacked as a group?

If they snuck into a corporation of 200 thousand and began sabotaging it, would it stand any chance of recovering?

“We have to stop Yume’s group no matter what,” concluded Hishigami Ama. “And that means protecting Kuji who would act as their sample. I’m the only one that knew where she was, but the foolish Ministry of Defense went in for the attack. I couldn’t let this fall apart from such a simple mistake. …Now, let’s get to the real problem. The JSDF is too hardheaded to be any use. And from the look of things, the police can’t restrain the other Hishigami Women. What’s left? An American base or a submarine? But the CIA scares me for a different reason. So where are we supposed to set our goal?”

Part 7 (3rd person)

The attack had ended in failure.

The sun was setting and night had arrived. After losing their target’s trail, they gave up on directly tracking her and shifted to the next phase.

“What a pain. Six Hishigami Women were hunting her and we still failed? Just how much of a monster is Ama?”

That complaint came from Yuu, the beautiful woman in a bikini top, skinny pants, and a military coat. She was in public, but she made no attempt to hide her giant anti-tank rifle known as a 1941. When she was that open about it, passersby convinced themselves it must be a toy or for a movie shoot. She had lived her life this far using that ridiculous logic.

Hishigami Raku, a woman with short hair and sickly pale skin, cut in.

“A-are you sure…it wasn’t a case of…too many cooks…spoiling the broth?”

“Oh? That’s rich coming from one of the ones who tripped me up. You all were supposed to stop her while I shot her. And who was it that let the target escape the hunting grounds?”

Hishigami Rou, a beautiful woman in a black dress, gave an exasperated sigh.

“Hounds and beaters have limited stamina and focus. A hunter and team that fails to take the best shot is a limit on the hunting ground, don’t you think?”

“Oh, oh. You wanna settle this in a back alley or something?”

The Hishigami Women quickly started butting heads, but that was just their nature. The Hishigami Women were a sign of active parting, so they were ill suited for working as a group.

There was only one thing just barely holding them together:

“Okay, okay!”

“Goh!? Ow!”

“C’mon, get along, all of you☆ Let’s take a photo together to celebrate making up. I have a selfie stick, so gather around.”

“No selfie stick is that heavy. That’s gotta be a special police bato-…owww!?”

The innocent girl of about ten overpowered the adult women and forced them inside the frame.

She was Hishigami Yume.

She was Yume who Destroys Ethics.

Simply put, she used conversations, the atmosphere, and sudden events to destroy the “moral” that the Hishigami Women were ill suited for working as a group. That just barely linked them together in an awkward network and maintained some temporary cooperation.

“Say cheese! Vee vee!”

“Whenever you step in front of the camera, you just have to give an upturned look and either suck your thumb or give a peace sign… That’s just painful.”

They continued causing a commotion as they returned to their base.

They had a few hideouts in reserve, but this time they used a church located inside a high-rise building.

There they found a girl in a nun's habit with cloth cut out to expose her navel.

She was Hishigami Taga.

She was Taga who Destroys Faith.

"Welcome back."

"Based on that weird smell, I take it I don't want to take a peek in the back."

Yuu sounded annoyed as she rested her anti-tank rifle on her shoulder and the nun giggled in an awfully provocative way.

"There's no need to be so nervous. An older man of character may have been lying on his back all day babbling like a baby, but he hasn't been harmed. Feel free to take a look if you want an excellent example of what happens when someone who lives a life of celibacy finally breaks free of his bonds."

"Yeah, I'd rather not."

Yuu still sounded annoyed and she grabbed Yume's collar when the little girl tilted her head curiously.

"Oh, too bad. Munch, munch."

The nun nonchalantly carried a bucket-like container between both hands (and her chest).

This immediately grabbed the attention of elementary school aged Yume.

"By the way, what are you eating? Oh, it's popcorn!"

"Heh heh heh. These are the snacks Arawa-san made and left here for us. Do the rest of you want any?"

But Yuu and Rou seemed reluctant.

"Those are made from that genetically modified stuff, aren't they? I prefer natural ingredients."

"And what fruits and vegetables did she have mixed together this time? Last

time it was cucumbers growing in a bunch like bananas.”

The adults were disgusted, but Yume began stuffing her mouth with the popcorn the nun held.

“Keh. You people sound like virginity-obsessed idol otaku. Are breast implants and liposuction really that wrong!? Punsuka pun!!”

“Yume, you need quite a bit of reeducation later on. And with how twisted you are, we’ll have to redo it boot camp style.”

Yume covered her face and began to cry in a blatantly fake way, but the others ignored it. A girl who cried wolf tended to create uncaring surroundings.

The nun slowly tilted her head.

“More importantly, I don’t see Ama-san with you.”

“We screwed up. Arawa-chan is checking over the security camera network, but she says it probably won’t help.”

“I went all out, so I was hoping to resupply. I called Shitsu, so I hope that’s okay.”

“Geh!? You know we’re like water and oil!”

Taga frantically waved her hands around in her modified nun’s habit, but it was too late.

The church’s door opened and a sexy teacher in glasses walked in. Her outfit looked like a suit with a tight skirt at first, but it was actually quite unusual. The gloves were a part of the jacket that left her cleavage well-exposed and what looked like a tight skirt was actually the bottom of a camisole. And for a finishing touch, she wore fishnet stockings.

These were the very first words out of her mouth:

“Illicit sexual relations nun, step out back for a moment. I need to teach you how to behave like a lady even if I have to beat it into you.”

“Nooooo thank you! This is my territory, so save the all-important act for when you’re in your rotten school!”

The nun stuck out her tongue and Yume soothed her while asking a question.

“Which school are you at now? The one in Daikanyama?”

“That one is gone now.”

“Then is it the one in the south Aoyama residential district?”

“That one is gone too.”

“Just how many schools are you going to destroy? Honestly…”

Hishigami Taga sounded exasperated and the tall teacher crouched down on the floor.

A dark and heavy aura surrounded her.

“They’re all such good children and all I’m doing is hoping for their success and happiness. So why does it always end in such unfortunate accidents…?”

“Accidents? You arm them, hole up in the school, and lead them to mass suicide.”

“But they’re all so cute I can’t help but pour my heart and soul into their special afterschool lessons. And the idealistic nonsense in the textbooks is as distasteful as food additives, so I just want to give them an early peak of the real world.”

“Yes, but that’s not much good when they end up giving up on the world and reaching for weapons,” said Rou as she sighed in her black dress.

“Anyway.” Hishigami Yume changed the subject. “Shitsu-chan, do you have what you were asked to bring?”

Still curled up on the floor, the teacher pointed toward the door with her thumb.

They all looked outside and saw container boxes filling the trunk of a flashy sports car.

Weapon-loving Yuu licked her lips.

“Good, good. Now I won’t have to worry about ammo.”

“I’m amazed that made it through the checkpoints,” commented Rou.

“Your position in society is important. Like a teacher or a civil servant! I can

pass through most anywhere without issue since I wear this nun's habit."

"Heh heh. I can do that too! Vee, vee!" exclaimed Yume. "Although I do get policemen, teachers, and other adults mistaking me for a lost child and approaching me for no reason."

"Anyway," said Taga. "What are we going to do about Ama-san? You already said Arawa-san the cyber war expert is unlikely to find her."

"That just means we need to check the lodging facilities with few or no cameras." Yume sounded carefree. "Tokyo is a Peeping Tom's paradise with a million security cameras, so the areas not monitored are the exception. That means we just need to check the areas within walking distance of Ichigaya. … How about we start with a radius of five kilometers? Even Ama-chan can only do so much while dragging around that detective."

"Yeah, odds are she's hiding in one of those, but aren't there a ton of those, um, well, love hotels?" Yuu mumbled a little and scratched her cheek. "And Ama will definitely have used a fake name, so where do we start looking?"

Rou answered in her black dress.

"Arawa will be able to get her hands on those lists full of fake names, right?"

"And?"

"Love hotels have peak hours and different rental plans. For example, you can rest there from evening to night or spend the night until morning." Rou winked. "But not many people will arrive in midday, choose an overnight plan right away, and hide out there for so long. That will narrow things down some, won't it?"

The situation was on the move.

In an intentionally cutesy act, small Yume placed her hands on her cheeks and fidgeted as she spoke.

"My first time at a love hotel? Oh, I'm so excited☆"

Part 8

It was late at night and we were taking a nap to recover our stamina as much as possible.

I don't know what caused it, but Hishigami Ama and Hishigami Kuji stirred and then sat up at the same moment.

I was confused over on the two-person sofa I had somehow managed to fit on.

"What? What is it?"

"Get down!!"

Hakama-wearing Kuji leapt at me like a carnivorous beast and knocked me and the sofa back onto the floor.

A moment later, I saw something past Kuji's shoulder.

There was a fist-sized hole in the hotel wall.

At first, I had no idea what that could mean, but realization slowly crept in.

Hishigami Yuu's anti-tank rifle!?

What would have happened if Kuji hadn't knocked me back!?

"Mgh, mgh."

"Nn… I know you're trying to thank me, but please stop breathing into my chest like that."

"Mghhh!?"

And it did not end with just the one shot.

More and more holes appeared at even intervals along the wall. Masses of lead larger than my thumb were flying through the room. The rate of fire was not as great as a machinegun, but the force of each shot was so extreme that my legs froze up. I could not move properly. I had my handgun in my pocket, but it would be no better than a protective charm. I could only crawl along and pray that the storm of destruction passed.

But this was not a natural disaster.

It was an intentional act with an objective and a goal.

So this was not going to end if all I did was pray. Ama spoke while similarly

down on the floor.

“The purpose of the 1941 has changed. She’s holding us in place while the other members reach their positions. I want to take action before they achieve checkmate!”

“Understood. Let’s go through the floor.”

They readily decided on a course of action, so I ended up just watching.

A moment later, we broke through the hotel room floor as they had said we would.

I couldn’t even imagine what exactly Ama and Kuji had done.

As far as I could see, they had only lightly pressed their fists against the floor.

At any rate, we were all dragged down to the next floor.

“Eh? Ehhh? What? Ehh? What is going on!?”

A couple who had been enjoying themselves was panicking in the bed, but we did not have time to explain.

Yuu was still targeting us in the floor above.

Meanwhile, Kuji kicked down the door to the hallway. The three of us made our way to the emergency stairs. As usual, Ama was faster than me despite the iron balls.

I heard the sound of breaking metal.

A bent elevator door was thrown out into the hallway to block our way. And then someone slowly stepped out. She had short hair and wore a short modified kimono.

“Arata who Destroys Tradition!?”

“Yesterday’s standard won’t work tomorrow. And the same can be said of your lives!!”

As the girl named Arata shouted, something flew from her sleeve. A metal pipe extended like a stage magician’s wand and the bottom was attached to a small gas cylinder.

“Go to hell, you morons! Die at the low, low price of fifteen thousand yen for parts!! That’s the laughable value you’ve managed to build up over your entire lives! Gwa ha ha ha ha!!”

Hakama-wearing Kuji took one look at the mysterious metal pipe the girl held like a bazooka, and…

“Not good!!”

She kicked down a nearby door and all three of us dove inside.

But an ear-splitting explosive sound still assaulted us. The mass of sound exploded in my head and I couldn’t even stand up straight. I felt the same urge to vomit as having the back of my head hit with a bat. It was a very dangerous feeling!

“———!?”

Hishigami Ama shouted something from nearby and grabbed my arm, but I couldn’t tell what she was saying.

I shook my spinning head and thought about the weapon that had done this.

Was it a directional shockwave cannon?

The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department had considered adopting those as a nonlethal suppression device. It used the explosion of a standard gas cylinder and created a continuous explosive roar by passing that through a tube with special grooves carved into it. The resultant mass of sound could neutralize a violent criminal from as far away as fifty meters.

This girl wore a kimono yet she used futuristic weapons. Even that gamer Zashiki Warashi flirting with my nephew back in the Intellectual Village would have been shocked to see that!

“A sound————kai. Is…boosting…with a Yamabiko!?”

“Arata’s…more than just————. Stand up!”

My ears had finally recovered.

Hakama-wearing Kuji gently shook her hand.

“What do we do? If Arata contacts Yuu, the anti-tank rifle will start targeting

this floor.”

“Then we just have to escape before we’re killed.”

One of them grabbed my hand again.

Of all things, Ama and Kuji ran right into the wall on the side the bullets had come from before.

Their tackle broke through the outer wall and I was pulled out with them whether I liked it or not.

In other words, all three of us were falling.

I saw a flash of light in the night and a sharp wind passed right by me. A few seconds slower and I would have lost my head or my heart.

“Waaaah!?”

I felt the biting wind of the midwinter night.

We were about three stories up.

We passed right over the sidewalk and fell on top of the long and narrow container of a truck driving below.

Without Ama and Kuji’s help, I probably would have broken at least my ankles.

“Pant, pant!”

“We can rest easy for the time being…”

In the light of the streetlights we passed by, hakama-wearing Kuji looked at the scenery behind us and confirmed we were leaving the love hotel.

Ama was carefree.

She sat on the container, grabbed the chest of her dress-like outfit, and fanned herself with it. She let the night wind inside her clothing as she spoke.

“By the way, do you know anyone you could call for backup? Someone at the Hishigami level would be nice.”

“Don’t joke. Thanks to that crazy bastard Mishima, my 0-X Office is nothing but civilian middle school girls. How could I call them to a battlefield like this!?”

“Are those your principals?”

“So what if they are?”

We glared at each for a bit, but this alone I could not back down on.

Those girls were my allies, but not my fighting force.

I didn’t want to define them that way.

Meanwhile, the truck continued to drive.

Part 9

Something wasn’t right.

I started to think that when the truck below our feet left the main road and drove toward the entrance to the highway.

“Hey, are we going to stick around for a long distance drive? The driver might be listening to the late night radio enka as he heads as far north as Hokkaido or as far south as Okinawa.”

“That’s a good point. How about we jump off when it briefly stops at the intercha-…kyah!?”

I heard the unmanned ETC gate break. Hakama-wearing Kuji cowered down and the truck arrived on the highway. In fact, the engine was revving up even higher. The dark night was more rapidly interrupted by the evenly-spaced streetlights.

Ama clicked her tongue as her white hair fluttered in the violent wind.

“This truck is bad news.”

“In what way!?”

“It wasn’t coincidentally driving by at just the right time. The Hishigami Women timed it to catch us!”

It was likely driving at more than 120 kph. Even the highway felt dangerous at

this speed. The truck was a moving cage now. As long as it maintained this speed, we could not jump off to escape.

“Do the civilian driving recorders and speed violation checkers not matter? Have they never heard of being careful?”

“I want to believe that Arawa is helping out with her cyber war skills. …If they really are doing nothing, I’ll skin them and make a rug out of them.”

I heard a creaking sound.

It came from the driver’s compartment. Like a monster from a horror movie, someone crawled out of the window and onto the roof where they hung on with both hands and feet.

“Yume…”

“Hee hee.”

“Yume who Destroys Ethics…!!”

“Ee hee hee. Hee hee hee hee. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

It was a girl of about ten. This meant she had been the one driving the truck all this time and it meant the driver had let go of the steering wheel to climb onto the roof. The extreme moral hazard made me feel faint, but I could not just give up on reality.

That monster had locked onto us.

What happened to the truck was only the beginning. The climax of our lives was about to start.

“You’re so mean, Ama-chan, Kuji-chan. Why are you making us go to all this trouble?”

She pulled out a…smartphone selfie stick? No, it was so heavy it was more like a special police baton.

Her small hands attached a mass of metal to the joint at the end.

It was now more or less a construction site sledgehammer.

“But it’s over now. You two will at least let me have the time of my life first, won’t you?”

Hishigami Ama responded by reaching for her own head. She pulled out a single long white hair.

She had said before that a single hair was enough to kill a tiger.

“I won’t let this go your way,” she announced. “I am Ama who Destroys Hope. Anyone who thinks they’re nice and safe in a sanctuary or safe zone is within range for me.”

“And another thing.” The small girl glanced over at hakama-wearing Kuji. “Ama-chan is one thing, but why you too, Kuji-chan?”

The answer came with a gentle smile.

And with a shake of her unnaturally heavy sleeves.

“I am Kuji who Destroys Trust.”

“Ohhh, I see.”

“And we aren’t actually at the kind of disadvantage you seem to think we are. Yume, you’re more suited to working in groups than alone. Are you mocking us by trying to take us on two against one?”

“Who ever said I was doing this alone?”

For an instant, I thought some other Hishigami Women were hiding in the truck’s container.

But I was wrong.

The threat came from outside the trailer.

It was shaped something like a “V” or a boomerang.

It was tiny and lightweight military aircraft that removed all the safety features from the manned variety.

My eyes widened in shock.

“A UAV!? What air base did you take that from!?”

“Nee hee hee. You can thank Arawa-chan’s cyber war skills for this one. According to her, these military variants have grown in number ever since crop management drones became plentiful in Intellectual Villages.”

I didn’t know the details, but it was definitely loaded with missiles meant for ground attacks.

And there was more than one.

Since this was not a human opponent, I pulled out my handgun without thinking, but then I froze up.

More than ten of the UAVs gathered around from various directions.

If they all attacked at once, there was no escape.

And they were not just leaving this to the machines. The phantasmagoric Hishigami Woman named Hishigami Yume had announced she would weave through the gaps in the downpour of bombs to attack!

“You have to be kidding… And you’ll be caught in the blast too!”

I spoke up in a daze, but Yume only gave a “nee hee☆” of laughter and pointed at her own flat chest.

“I’m Yume who Destroys Ethics. When you’re all comfortably protected by your myth of safety, you’re actually allllll on my field.”

Damn, is she the type that delights in being attacked!? Happily offering yourself up as the detonator for a moral hazard is not normal!

“That does not change what we must do.” Hishigami Ama thinly smiled with the long hair in hand. “We have already reached checkmate. Don’t think you can overturn that now.”

“That’s my line. The most troublesome turn of events for us was you getting captured by the JSDF and being secured below Ichigaya. Don’t forget that you were playing into our hands from the moment you continued running around out here.”

No signal was needed.

That also meant there was no time to stop them.

Hishigami Ama and Hishigami Kuji.

Hishigami Yume and Hishigami Arawa’s UAVs.

The two sides were going to clash with overwhelming force!!

Part 10

In that instant, my mind went blank and I couldn't make any logical calculations.

I simply didn't like it.

It was true Hishigami Yume was the root cause of all this. There was no room for taking extenuating circumstances into consideration there. She would silence Hishigami Ama, investigate Hishigami Kuji's body, and take advantage of the structure of the Hishigami Men and Hishigami Women to overthrow the Hishigami Group and drown Japan in debt through economic collapse. We had to stop that no matter what.

But I didn't like the structure of this battle.

Hishigami Yume may have thought she was satisfied as she walked her own path and lived a life of happiness without anything to complain about.

But her eyes looked like chipped and rusty blades.

I kind of felt like I was seeing an image of what Enbi would have become if she had grown up without opening up to anyone. I didn't like seeing that.

I didn't want to be on the side throwing stones at her.

So…

Part 11

"Wha-…ah!?"

"Are you insane, Favorite-kun!? Dammit!!"

The shouting voices reached me after a delay.

I was frantic. I could not allow Hishigami Yume to live a life where she would clash with her enemies and even have her own allies view her as disposable.

It was nothing more than that.

So I intervened. I ran forward and tackled Hishigami Yume's skinny waist.

It was all over immediately afterwards.

The UAVs fired a great number of air-to-surface missiles. I was unable to control my own body and fell right off the truck container. And Hishigami Yume, that rusted girl of about ten, was still in my arms.

We were in a world of death running at 120 kph.

Was this the end?

I had desperately put my life on the line, but was that going to completely backfire?

"!!"

I did my best to surround Yume's body and prayed I would act as a cushion. We would probably both be torn to pieces the instant we landed, but I didn't want to give up without doing anything.

Why mind went blank.

My brain was fried.

My memories lost continuity, my sense of pain vanished, and time stretched out infinitely.

And…

And…

And…

…

…

…

How long did I keep doing that?

I may have shouted something along the way because the inside of my throat felt like it had torn apart.

But that was all.

No part of my body seemed to have broken. My flesh hadn't been torn to shreds as if someone had taken a grater to it. I was simply sitting on the shoulder of the highway with the small girl in my arms.

She was safe too.

It was weird for me to feel relief at that fact, but I didn't want to think it was wrong.

The truck had driven away.

What had happened with the downpour of missiles?

I was pretty sure there had been an explosion, but I saw no wreckage and the elevated highway was intact. Had Ama and Kuji intercepted the twenty or so missiles with some kind of projectile? Not even a cruiser's CIWS was that accurate.

Lastly, I was sitting not on the ground but on a V-shaped or boomerang-shaped object. It was an oddly-shaped aircraft that was now broken and unusable.

"A…UAV?" I muttered.

Had it matched our relative speed to catch us? If so, just how superhuman were Hishigami Arawa's skills?

And did that mean I hadn't accomplished anything?

Risking my life had backfired and someone had needed to make up for my mistake. What was I doing here?

The one piece of luck was that Ama and Kuji had managed to escape pursuit while Yume's side was focused on me.

What was going to happen to me?

I no longer had the protection of Hishigami Ama and Kuji and now evil Yume was in my arms. And she had plenty of allies. I had already learned all too well

that my puny little revolver wasn't enough for someone like this. It was possible it really was over for me.

But just as I was thinking that, the winds seemed to change.

"Fidget, fidget…"

"Hm?"

Hishigami Yume was acting oddly in my arms. Her face was red and she was looking up at me with damp eyes.

"Squirm, squirm. Ahh, he knew I was his enemy and he's completely powerless, but he still rushed out without a single thought for his own life to save me. Yes and it's because he's completely powerless that his selflessness appears so beautiful. And when I see that superior sense of justice…no, that sense of ethics, it's like running across a ton of bubble wrap. I feel like I've found the ultimate toy. Squirm, squirm, squirm."

"Hey, what is going on here? Explain it all from the beginning."

"A-ahh. Can I call you Onii-chan?"

"Explain!!"

I ended up shouting at her. First Mystery Freak Enbi and now her. Why was it always so hard to tell what these girls were thinking!?

But for some reason, Yume looked confused.

"Really, you're the one that needs to explain yourself, Onii-chan."

"Stop calling me that. And what do you mean?"

"Okay." Yume nodded surprisingly obediently. "Why are you helping Ama-chan with her master plan to destroy the world?"

I had no idea what she was talking about.

Part 12

I wanted to go back over what I knew.

Simply put, what was going on?

“Wait, wait, wait! Isn’t the group with the conspiracy the one you’re leading!? Don’t you want to use Kuji, who used a Mermaid or something and got a sex change to switch from the Hishigami Men to the Hishigami Women, in order to go the other way and tear the Hishigami Group apart from within!?”

“Ohh, that’s a pretty well put-together cover story. But you only have Ama-chan’s word to go on there, right? Do you have any objective proof?”

“…! O-oh, right. Hishigami Kuji said it was true.”

“You mean Kuji who Destroys Trust? C’mon, she’s the Hishigami that loves betraying people’s bonds, the more inviolable the better.”

“You’re…kidding, right?”

Everything in my mind was crumbling away.

Even the basic assumptions were vanishing.

“Then what is all this? This means I don’t even know why Hishigami Ama lured the police and JSDF into a confrontation!”

“Ama-chan is the one that destroys hope. She wouldn’t be all upset about something as small as the destruction of Japan.”

Yume laughed while fidgeting in my arms.

“She’s been after one thing from the beginning: the strongest and worst of the Hishigami Woman who it’s said will wipe out a quarter of the earth’s population if she fully awakens.”

No.

Wait. Don’t tell me…!!

“Hishigami Enbi. She wants to cause a faulty connection in Enbi who Destroys Humans so she can rewire her, Onii-chan.”

Ah.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“In other words.” Yume giggled and traced her index finger along my jaw. “Her escape from the JSDF, crashing that parade, and just so happening to take a certain detective hostage was all a bluff. None of it mattered…except for coming into contact with Uchimaku Hayabusa, the only person in the world who can restrain Hishigami Enbi’s violent side and keep her as nothing more than a cute girl. She wanted to get her hands on the safety that holds back Enbi-chan’s superhuman destruction, which includes all forms of intelligent killing and far surpasses the limits of an individual. Whether in the short term or the long term, Ama-chan wanted to build up a bond with you, increase your dependence on her, and create an environment in which she could control you. And of course, that was so she could indirectly control Hishigami Enbi.”

“…”

“Did she ever put on a blatant act? Get close to you in the nude? Press her boobs up against you? Hee hee. You’re hopeless. Men may be wolves, but women are ‘humans’ with the ability to tame wolves and reduce them to mere dogs. You can’t let yourself form emotional bonds from nothing more than that.”

Enbi.

Hishigami Enbi.

That Mystery Freak had become a normal presence by my side, but she was still one of the Hishigami Women. And I had vaguely heard that she was a fairly unusual example.

Was she really the crux of this issue?

Was that all this was?

All these monsters were competing over this, so was it really, truly about a catastrophe that could destroy the world!?

“Why?”

“Hm?”

“Why is Hishigami Ama so intent on bringing ruin!? If that fairy tale comes true, one in four people will die, right!? One in four means one or two people

from every family on the planet. Take the indirect chaos into account and the entire planet will be a mess. There's no guarantee Ama herself will survive, is there!?"

"She is Ama who Destroys Hope." Yume's answer was almost too simple. "Then again, it isn't like we're bound to ethics or birth or whatever. I won't deny we have our likes and dislikes, but it comes down to the tool we're most used to using. So if we want to destroy that, there's a reason we want to do so. I doubt you could investigate it and reach an understanding of it this late in the game, though."

I felt dizzy.

It was hopeless. I couldn't keep up. I could never catch up to someone like this, so how could I stop them?

"But I'm glad." Yume, however, sounded carefree. "You're Hishigami Enbi's controller…no, her detonator. So getting you away from Ama-chan means a lot, Onii-chan."

"Are you…sure?"

"No matter how much Ama-chan tries to convince her, Enbi-chan won't do anything. She needs something that will cause a real impact, such as slowly slaughtering you right in front of her. And not just killing you. It has to be in a way that robs you of all dignity. She just about has everything set up now. As long as we can protect you from her, we hold the initiative."

That wasn't it.

That wasn't what I was talking about.

Hishigami Ama was one of the extraordinary Hishigami Women. Would a monster like that really be careless enough to let this happen?

Wouldn't she have set up some kind of insurance?

That was what my question had meant.

"Ah."

"Onii-chan?"

I wasn’t able to answer her question.

I heard a bursting sound from behind my ear and my vision spun around.

“Onii-chan!?”

Part 13

I didn’t know where I was when I came to.

Based on the light entering through the stained glass and the chirping of the birds, it was morning.

The place did not have a modern design and I was not familiar with it. It was a Western church or chapel. I didn’t know the exact classification, but it was that sort of building.

“Oh, looks like he woke up.”

That comment came from…a nun? However, her clothing was quite provocative and made no attempt to hide her bodylines.

“…?”

“Eh heh heh. We haven’t introduced ourselves yet, have we? I’m Hishigami Taga. That’s Arawa-san and Shitsu-san. And over there we have Rou-san, Yuu-san, Raku-san, Arata-san, and, um, you already met Yume-san, didn’t you?”

“Wait, wait. That’s way too much at once.”

I held my dizzy head and somehow managed to stand up from the pew.

I checked out of habit and found I still had my police badge and gun. They may have thought they weren’t worth confiscating.

“Where am I? And what happened?”

“Ama-san seems to have implanted something in your body already. There’s something in your inner ear, but we can’t remove it right now. We need to

neutralize Ama-san to keep her from remotely controlling it.”

“Something…in my ear?”

“It’s Youkai-related. Knowing Ama-san, it’s probably a Nue. It resonates with a distant location to vibrate your lymph fluid. It’s like a phone on silent.”

A Nue.

I was pretty sure that monster was a combination of multiple animals, much like the chimera of Greek mythology. It was a deadly Youkai that made people sick using a cry one would not expect of its body. So was the necktie slash related to that? No, it didn’t match the legends. She may have had more than one basis for her attacks.

Or maybe she was managing several paranormal powers at once using that composite Youkai as if it were a color palette or an address book.

“The Nue was punished by being shot. That’s why we were relying on Yuu-san’s sniping, but it didn’t work out very well.”

“…”

I pressed on the back of my ear.

Was this better than having a bomb in my brain or heart?

No, Hishigami Ama needed to use me to torment Enbi. In that case, a bomb that instantly killed me would have the opposite effect. This was more like a sniper shooting their target’s arm or leg to lure out the target’s allies who came to help.

When had she done this?

She had had plenty of opportunities to touch me. She had embraced me from behind after saying she was taking a shower, she had sat on my lap in the police car, and she had put me in an armlock at the very beginning.

“Oh, Onii-chan’s up!?”

My thoughts were cut off by a cheerful voice.

Yume seemed to have noticed me while she was fed fries or something by a girl with hair wrapped all around her. Was that Arawa?

“Hm? Hmm???”

“What is it, brat? Why are you getting so close?”

“You’ve got girls all around you, but your heart isn’t really pounding. But it’s those superior ethics that make you so much fun, Onii-chan. By the way, do you prefer big boobs or flat chests? Depending on your answer, I might give you a sign of my appreciation.”

“Are you completely incapable of staying on topic!?”

“Based on that reaction, I’m guessing you’re into big boobs. Ahh, ahh. Raku-chaaan! Give me the miracle bra of my dreams!!”

I looked up again and notice the other Hishigami Women approaching along with Yume. They all somewhat resembled Enbi and Mai, but they gave off a much stronger impression of a rusted blade.

“Hmm, so this is Enbi’s detonator.”

“A fairly forgettable face. I doubt he has much luck with money.”

“But the more hopeless the pupil, the more passion I put into their lessons. Ahh, the core of my body is heating up…”

But what did that mean? Whose fault was it? Wasn’t it the same as when Enbi had had a rusted blade look in her eyes? Wasn’t it just that they had yet to meet the right kind of person and no one had given them the chance?

In that case, what about Hishigami Ama and Kuji?

“Can you tell me something?”

“Tell you what?” bluntly asked Arawa, the girl with hair wrapped all around her body.

There was only one thing I wanted to know.

“Hishigami Ama holds my life in her hands and I don’t even know who she really is.”

They exchanged a glance.

The one who finally opened her mouth was Hishigami Shitsu, who was dressed like a teacher.

She placed a finger on the side of her glasses as she did.

“I enjoy private afterschool lessons more than any meal, so leave it to me. Hishigami Ama has a different origin then the rest of us normal Hishigami Women.”

“?”

“Are you aware of the project to artificially implant the traits of a Hishigami Woman into a normal person?”

Oh, yeah.

Hishigami Kyou of the Hishigami Men had some of those as bodyguards, didn’t he?

“You mean like Zei and Akane?”

“Then I will not need to explain that. Hishigami Ama is a hybrid. No, maybe I should compare her to a multi-stage rocket. She was already a Hishigami Woman, but she also had the traits artificially written on top of that.”

“Of course, no one could control her after that, so she escaped,” added Yume.

Hishigami Shitsu nodded in agreement.

“The Hishigami Women are normally killed the instant they are born. We are the ones who escaped that fate by some kind of mistake, coincidence, or miracle. That is just how unpleasant people find us.”

“…”

“But Ama alone is different. They hoped to increase her power. In other words, she is the only Hishigami Woman who was blessed and welcomed. After all, you might refer to a flying hunk of metal as a bullet, but once it escapes the atmosphere, it becomes a spaceship instead, right? Or perhaps you would call it a mass driver.”

Once she entered teacher mode, she would not stop.

She continued talking on and on.

“She would be a useful Hishigami Woman, like a spider or a silkworm. She would be a Hishigami Woman who destroyed nothing. Someone like that would

indeed tear down the standard assumptions. Or perhaps everyone's dependence on her would have begun a much kinder and gentler sort of destruction. But regardless, Ama never managed to reach outer space and never surpassed the level of a bullet."

What was this?

Ama who Destroys Hope.

I had essentially been reaching inside a box in a dark room to figure out what was inside. I had thought I would never understand her.

But I had been wrong.

There was something understandable there after all.

That was what she meant by destroying hope. She had shaken hands with someone and done her very best, but she had not lived up to the Hishigami Men's ridiculous demands. Afterwards, they had irresponsibly branded her hopeless and acted like they had known that from the beginning. Then she had been all alone.

They had said Hishigami Ama had escaped.

But was that really what had happened? When whatever it was had happened, hadn't the Hishigami Men run off and left her behind? Hadn't she lost her chance to return and been stuck out there?

More importantly, she was still out there on her own. None of the Hishigami Men had stuck with her to the end. They had given up once she was gone. After she lost her chance to return, none of them had been there to tell her to come on back and that they would bow down with her. Ama had been with them for so long, yet they had not known anything about her. They had not known what she wanted or where she would hide, so they had been unable to pursue her.

Was she really an incomprehensible monster?

Why could no one understand her?

Which side had really failed to make an effort?

How…?

How was that any different from Enbi when she had had those rusty blade-like eyes?

“Hey.”

The next thing I knew, I was speaking.

The problem wasn’t just Enbi and Ama. Nor was it confined to the Hishigami Women gathered here. Yes. I had finally found what I needed to do.

What I needed to do as a police officer had been right in front of my eyes the entire time.

It was an incredibly simple, yet incredibly difficult decision.

But I had to say it.

Now is the time to show you’re a man, Uchimaku Hayabusa.

“I don’t want to give up on Hishigami Ama.”

“…”

“I’m not saying I’m on her side. I don’t want to create opposing sides in the first place. I’m not going to abandon the Hishigami Women I met here and I don’t want to create any Hishigami Women that I can just turn my back on because I don’t know them.”

So…

I didn’t need anything complicated. I just had to obediently work toward the first thing that had come to mind when I had heard that the Hishigami Women brought calamity.

What else could I do?

There was something wrong with a life of curling up in the darkness and not seeking any help just because you were supposedly born that way.

What else could I do?

There was definitely something wrong with a life of justifying all forms of violence and feeling no guilt just because you were supposedly born that way.

Someone had to tell them it was wrong.

Someone had to tell them they were being far too clumsy.

Someone had to tell them there was a painless path over here.

It could be anyone, but someone had to take their battered hand and bring them out into the light. Someone had to teach them how warm the world could be. And you didn't have to wait around for that person to show up. You just had to become that person yourself. And once you realized that, you didn't need to hold back. Once you named yourself, everything would be headed toward a solution. Even if it only happened one awkward step at a time, you would be headed in the right direction.

In other words…

"I want to save all of the Hishigami Women. I don't want to give up on any of you and I don't want to leave any of you out. …Sorry. Dammit, how can I call myself a police officer when it took me this long to say something so simple!?"

Part 14

There was one thing Hishigami Ama needed to win.

No matter how much she prepared and even if she tormented me with the Nue object in my body, she had to let Hishigami Enbi see that. She had to use that sight to send Enbi's emotions out of control and bring her to a full awakening.

In the end, even killing me was meaningless if Enbi didn't see it.

"Uchimaku Hayabusa, was it? What are you going to do about a weapon?"

"As a police detective, you've had gun training, right? And you don't have an allergy for anything other than that puny revolver, right? Here, I've got a ton of options, so choose whatever you like."

"Shitsu, Yuu. Let's have a proper talk after this is over. And if I'm going to borrow something, this is the most I can do."

“Onii-chan, do you really think a stun gun is enough to defeat Ama-chan?”

“No, but this is the best option.”

“?”

Ama had two possible courses of action.

She could capture me and bring me to Enbi.

Or she could capture Enbi and bring her to me.

These days, it was possible to show someone a live video over the internet or a smartphone, but Ama wouldn’t do that.

She only had one opportunity to use the rare resource known as Uchimaku Hayabusa. If there happened to be a communication error at the exact moment she crushed my flesh and squeezed out my juices, it was all over. A single mistake would put her goal forever out of reach. Not to mention that Hishigami Yume’s side had a cyber war expert like Arawa and the Hishigami Men could use their ownership of the information infrastructure corporation to cut off the signal.

“Sorry, but does anyone have a needle and thread?”

“Do you have…a gaping wound…somewhere? I can…sew you…up.”

“There are this many girls here and not one of you has a sewing set!? There’s a severe lack of femininity around here!”

“The fact that you would say that so bluntly makes me question how popular you could be.”

“Shut up, cosplay nun. Can I stop by a convenience store or drugstore? I need to gather some supplies.”

“If you’re going shopping, you can take a few of my cards. As a sign of our newfound acquaintance.”

“Rou, why do you have a ton of cards from the same company? Those aren’t like those ‘leaf coins’, are they? At any rate, you’re all going to have to do some cleaning up after this is over.”

“If you’re going to the store, then buy me a soda. Convenience stores are so full of people during the day, so I don’t like getting anywhere near them. But

anyway, what are you planning to do?”

“You’re sending an adult on errands for you, Arata? Looks like you need some extra social studies lessons. Anyway, I need a needle and thread. If possible, decorative gold or silver thread. Even if it isn’t real, it just has to be a metallic kind of thread.”

“Ehh?”

“No complaining. And I’ll buy you a soda while I’m at it. …Either way, I’d also like a sports drink for some insurance.”

“…Nn…”

“Onii-chan, Arawa-chan is saying you should drink vegetable juice instead. She has some here in a water bottle.”

“I’m grateful, but I don’t want the sports drink to drink it. …And why do Yuu and Shitsu look so afraid of that water bottle? Is it really bitter or something?”

“N-no, the flavor is addictively fruity, but that’s not the problem.”

“Arawa makes genetically modified plants in her home garden. …And computer-loving Arawa got into this bio stuff due to the crazy idea that she wanted to have a ‘child’ by making a DNA computer out of the stem cells in her own hair. The garden is just a side project where she mixes together multiple fruits and vegetables for fun, but the problem is how eating the vegetables feels like eating her offspring or eating a clump of her hair.”

Hishigami Ama would put on her show in person.

She would make full use of her one and only chance.

And right now, I was protected by multiple Hishigami Women.

Until Hishigami Enbi had fully awoken, she was just a middle school girl.

Uchimaku Hayabusa or Hishigami Enbi?

It was plain as day which one Ama would capture. Unless things took a truly unexpected turn, she would definitely go for Enbi.

So…

“…”

The final battle took place halfway between afternoon and evening.

The students were beginning their delightful afterschool time.

We were at the scramble crossing in front of ZR Ochanimizu Station.

There was always a police box in front of train stations, but Hishigami Ama wouldn’t care.

When the crowd grew large enough, it would hide her from those watchful eyes. And if it came to it, that woman boasted she could kill a tiger with a single hair, so she could take care of a few police officers without batting an eye.

I was waiting for the scramble crossing’s light to change.

I had a headset in my ear.

“This is Yuu. I’m in place on top of the used guitar shop. But my 1941 will pierce straight through the target. If you decide to have me take the shot, think about the damage to your surroundings.”

“Wait there until I give you further orders.”

“This is Taga. I’m handing out flyers to mostly college students near the crossing. If she flees this way, I’ll guide the crowd into her. Rou-san is using the power of money to call in some foreign soccer players along a different route. If she removes her hat and sunglasses, it’ll cause a panic and seal off the road.”

“You all don’t hold back, do you? Anyway, stay put for now.”

“…Nmh…”

“Who was that!? Arata? Raku? Either way, hold tight until I give you further orders!”

Every last one of them was difficult. In shogi terms, it was like getting rid of all the other pieces and using nothing but knights and lances.

Although I was thankful for their presence since I was just a single pawn.

And there were two important kings.

The first was Hishigami Enbi. She was waiting for the light while chatting with

her friend Hachikawa Tomoe-chan who had glasses and a braid. That was our king who we could not have taken.

As for the second…

“This is Shitsu. I have spotted Hishigami Ama. She is on the opposite corner of the scramble from you.”

“…”

Was she a king we had to remove from the board?

No.

This was shogi, not chess. When we took a piece, we made it our own.

So wait there. I’ll bring you to our side, Ama. I’ll bring an end to your life as a rusted blade.

“We still have not located Hishigami Kuji. Be on your guard. She could make a surprise attack at any moment.”

“Understood. Wait there until I give you further orders.”

“Ahh. I’ve always looked down on everything from above, but being ordered around so forcefully is making the core of my body throb…”

The lights for the cars changed from green to yellow and then to red.

It was about to begin.

The crowd would flood the crossing and we would all pass by each other just once.

“Onii-chan.”

A voice reached my headset.

I saw a small figure standing next to me. Yume looked up at me with a mischievous look in her eyes and spoke to me directly.

“Let’s get started.”

“Right.”

I breathed in and out while counting down in my heart.

One.

Two.

Three.

The LED pedestrian signals all switched from red to green.

In that instant, my eyes met Ama's for just an instant.

Ama was smiling.

I didn't know what look I had on my face.

The sea of people finally began to move. Hishigami Ama vanished and I was likely hidden from her too.

In the crowd, I could feel Yume grab my hand, but I didn't bother looking back at her.

Enbi had yet to notice anything was wrong as she walked with her classmate. Her characteristic twintails were swaying through the crowd.

I had to stop this before Ama reached Enbi and Tomoe-chan.

That was all I had on my mind as I carefully observed my surroundings, but then I saw a white head unexpectedly close to Enbi.

Hishigami Ama!?

"This is…Raku. Watch out…Uchimaku!"

"Yeah, I saw Ama. She's right next to Enbi!!"

"No! That isn't Yume…holding your hand. It's Kuji!! Watch out!!"

…Eh?

My throat went dry in an instant.

When had she made the switch? And what had happened to the real Yume!?

I frantically tried to pull my hand free, but it was too late.

Vise-like pressure reached my wrist bones. But it wasn't her hand. The hakama sleeve or something else had wrapped around my wrist. She also kicked at the back of my knees to trip me. I sank below the crowd's sea of heads. But just

before I did, I saw the white head moving. *Dammit. I'm always a step behind! At this rate, Enbi will be taken away!!*

I shouted into my headset.

"Yuu, can you see Ama from above!? Arawa, what about the cameras!? Just tell everyone where she is! It can be Shitsu, Taga, Raku, or anyone else who can-…!!"

Before I finished speaking, the headset was pulled from my ear.

Dammit, I won't let this end here.

I don't care how dirty it is. I have to protect Enbi and stop Ama!!

"H-hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

A moment later, a hysterical scream erupted from hakama-wearing Kuji.

I had used my free hand to grab the bow at her waist that held the hakama in place.

Kuji's sleeve was wrapped around my arm, so shifting the upper part of her clothing out of place would give me more room to move and allow me to slip out. At any rate, I would win if I managed to strip her. And a hakama made it difficult to remove just the upper part, so I would have to remove the entire thing.

Sorry, Kuji!! But in this packed crowd, it will be harder for anyone to notice!!

At any rate, I had no time.

Ama was right next to Enbi. I practically plowed through the crowd as I moved.

Ahh, ahh. This really does disqualify me as a civil servant. But I have to reach her! I have to make it! I need to reach that final stage even if only for an instant!!

I want to save you.

Not just Enbi, but you too!!

Enbi and Tomoe-chan's surprised faces were right in front of me.

I was covered in sweat and Hishigami Ama remained entirely composed

without a single drop of sweat on her.

This monster could kill a tiger with a hair and break a bulletproof police car door with a tie.

I could never defeat her in a direct confrontation.

That was why I didn't even think about doing that. I only thought about keeping my back to the used guitar shop.

"Do it."

And I spoke.

I gave a command.

"Do it! Yuu, if you fire at Ama through me, it won't reach any of the pedestrians!!"

A moment later, Hishigami Ama seemed to explode.

No, what she did was rush toward me with dreadful speed and lift me up by my collar with a single hand. She had iron balls attached to her arms and legs, so what was up with her body?

This wasn't just a performance.

She was changing our positions so Yuu could not take the shot I had ordered.

But should she really have done that?

Their coordination was surprisingly bad. Was it due to them being all about active parting? Had Kuji forgotten to report that she had taken my headset? In other words, no matter how much I shouted, it wouldn't reach Yuu.

And I had not been thinking about defeating Hishigami Ama in the first place.

She had messed with my inner ear and she was a Hishigami Woman. Even at my best and even with a handgun, there was no way I could beat her.

And more importantly…

"You aren't an opponent to defeat. That's why I won't defeat you."

"Wha-…?"

"I'll prove to you that there is a place for you in society. I'll show you there's a

man right here who's willing to bow down to the sunny world alongside you! So grit your teeth for now! No matter how painful it is, this is so you can redo it all!!"

"Wait a second!! Oh, no!!"

She seemed to finally catch on, but it was too late.

A police officer's job wasn't to act cool and rebuke the criminal.

Nor was it to use the righteousness of the law to finish off the cornered and the weak with a smug look on your face.

I'll show you how I live my life, Hishigami Ama.

I really do understand you. I'm here because I figured out what you're thinking, what you want, what you rejected, and what you will do. I've reached the point those know-it-all Hishigami Men never did.

So there's nothing to be afraid of.

I'm not an incomprehensible monster. Just like you aren't an incomprehensible monster.

I had metal wires and decorative threads sewn all over my suit. No matter how much of a monster she was, I could move faster than she could let go.

And what exactly was I going to do?

The answer was simple: use the stun gun.

A loud zapping sound rang out.

A high voltage current passed from the device in my pocket, through the wires wrapped around the electrodes, and all throughout my suit. I had small plastic bags full of sports drinks stuffed in my suit here and there. They all burned through, scattered their contents, and even soaked Ama's fingertips as she carelessly held the fabric.

I had never been thinking about a clean victory.

The most I could have hoped for was a single counterattack.

After being electrified, Hishigami Ama and I both collapsed to the ground. The increased conduction from the sports drink may have helped because my mind

went blank. But that was fine. Shitsu, Taga, and Rou were all on the ground too.

So I could rest easy and pass this off to them.

I let go of my consciousness.

Even if this didn't knock you out as cleanly as me, the others can settle this while you can't move.

Hishigami Ama.

I'll show you the same thing one day. I'll show you a path where you can rest easy as you rely on someone else. I promise you I will. So stop straying from that path with the look of a child who has even forgotten how to cry.

Part 15

"Well?"

We were in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department's old conference room.

The room was now labeled as Investigation Department 1's 0-X Office.

I had gone to so much effort saving her, yet the twintailed Mystery Freak named Hishigami Enbi (who was in another outfit that might as well have been a swimsuit) was glaring at me.

She brought up the issue at hand.

"They're multiplying."

"…"

"They're multiplying like crazy! Being a Hishigami Woman was supposed to be super rare, so why are there ten more of them than yesterday!? My value is dropping like a rock!!"

"Th-there were a variety of reasons for this! This was the only place for them I could think of! Just let me explain. Although it might take a few days before all of

this is over…”

“Now, then. Which interrogation room is free right now?”

“I don’t think you need to go that far!”

I was the only actual detective in the 0-X Office and the rest were a variety of middle school girls, middle school girls, idols, middle school girls, and a Shikigami.

But one part of the group was especially out of the ordinary.

Hishigami Arawa, Shitsu, Raku, Yuu, Rou…and what were the others called? At any rate, when gathered together, they looked like the jacket of a fighting game.

“Now, detective, what is this I hear about not attaching GPS trackers to their ankles?”

“Oh, well, just think of their situation like yours. And doing that would be counterproductive anyway. I’d never be able to bridge the gap between us.”

“Okay, fine! But what is this Hishigami Annex of the Tokyo Detention Center!? It’s just a luxury apartment in Toranomon’s best district!”

“Don’t ask me! Go ask that idiot Mishima!!”

Even I was shocked by that one. They couldn’t be arrested without charging them with something and they couldn’t be given a proper trial, so they were only being taken into custody, given the label of a prisoner awaiting trial, and working off each of their crimes (which would normally warrant imprisonment times in the quadruple digits) with community service – that is, helping us with other cases. But this meant they were living better than me in my student apartment in Ochanomizu!

“So criminals get treated better than honest people these days? Then I think Enbi-chan needs to go bad to get her detective’s attention.”

“Please spare me! I already have my hands full!”

And why were there no other men here!? It might make me sound spoiled, but the place felt really awkward! Couldn’t a filthy guy show up every so often!?

Enbi rested her head in her hand and sighed.

“Well, I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything else from Uchimaku Hayabusa, the man of legend who managed to win the hearts of all 78 members of the national idol group Tarot Girls 22…”

“Hold on a second. What was that dangerous-sounding comment?”

“Now I’m feeling blue…”

As the Mystery Freak collapsed limply onto the desk, Atou Minori, civilian assistant producer at Hachi TV, approached with a grin on her face.

“I’m generally not interested in gossip, but how about you make a comment, Uchimaku-kun?”

“Wait, you idiot! Why is that camera running!? This place is supposed to be secret! Just leaking the building’s internal structure increases the risk of a terrorist attack!!”

“Oh, dear. Dodging inconvenient questions with unrelated arguments? You really are a civil servant.”

“Shut up, San-san.”

“You know I hate that…”

My other (old college) upperclassman (who had fluffy hair, glasses, and incredibly large breasts) grew tearful. Her name was Tsugawa San and it apparently still bothered her when people called her San-san.

Then Chief Superintendent Mishima, the bastard who created this chaotic 0-X Office, stepped inside. I could never tell if he was really busy or never had anything to do.

“Hi, Uchimaku-kun. Do you have a moment?”

“You’re kidding, right? I’ve skipped right past the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department and made the National Police Agency mad at me?”

“It is true I’d like to say a thing or two about your ability since it only took you a month to throw off the power balance so badly you’ve created the most powerful division in any police institution, but it all works out in the end since that just means the underhanded sort of people will be too afraid to touch you. It’s been a little difficult restraining the Ministry of Defense, but you’re going

above and beyond as far as crime prevention is concerned.”

“This doesn’t sound like a lecture. Then why are you here?”

“Well, you’re free to build up a powerful fighting force if you want, but I want to make sure you’re managing them properly. Look, aren’t you missing some of the new Hishigamis?”

“Of course n-…huh!? A few of them really are missing!? Where did Yume and Taga get off to!?”

I cried out like an owner of snakes, scorpions, or other bizarre pets who had discovered some had escaped, but then I heard a sound from below the table I was sitting at.

The innocent voice of a ten-year-old girl followed.

“Ee hee hee. I’m right here, Onii-chan. After all, making this my spot is nice and suggestive. Hee hee hee.”

Before I could respond in shock, Enbi bristled in anger.

“You just don’t get it! That’s not what love is all about. You can’t just do whatever comes to mind! You need to keep some kind of layer in the way!! You need to keep it in a sweet sugary wrapper, like the fantasy of an all-girls school smelling nice even after gym class!!”

“I don’t care about love or romance or whatever. When I see a pinnacle of ethics like Onii-chan, I just want to conquer him. I am Yume who Destroys Ethics, after all.”

I pulled Yume out as she started shaking, but then something soft pressed against my back.

Someone whispered to me while nearly rubbing her cheek against me.

“Ethics, hm? Raise the bar a little further and you reach the level of faith. And that’s my territory.”

“Taga! Wait! Not so close!”

I didn’t have time to say anything more because something heavy rested on my head.

But surely those soft somethings weren't what I thought they were.

"From the viewpoint of someone who destroys education, it might not be bad to corrupt a symbol of justice like you."

They really were breasts!

The legends saying that large ones were a strain on the shoulders seemed to be true. But this was no time to avoid reality by focusing on that weight. Even more of them were pressing in around me!

"How about we go destroy some systems together? And, wait. You all aren't leaving any space for me. Quit clinging to him from the side! Oh, I got his dominant hand!"

"What we need to tear down are the traditions of the police. And as long as I can accomplish that, I'm willing to share you with some others at the same time."

"I'm not really sure what's going on, but I'm sure I'll find a way to destroy finances somewhere in here."

"…Nmh."

"I-If Arata…is going to join in…I'm joining in too. I can give myself…any body type…that Hayabusa wants."

You don't even care about your Hishigami stuff anymore, do you!? You're just having fun with this, aren't you!?

But…

"Oh, dear. It looks like they beat me to it. And as a destroyer of trust, I was really interested in luring a police detective to my side."

"I just have to pull the entire chair to bring him closer to me. If you think taking up your position provides you with a stable sanctuary or safe zone, then you're already in range for me."

…

How?

How are Kuji and Ama already taking part in this kind of commotion!? They

were the culprits!! Not that I want to know all that much about the underside of this country!

"Everything seems to be in order here."

My eyes widened at Mishima's cheerful comment.

"What part of this is 'in order'?"

"All of it. …Honestly, even Majina was more discriminate than this. Uchimaku-kun, can you not tell how much of a miracle it is that you can do all this like it's normal? The fact that you can gather all these Hishigami Women together without it all breaking apart is simply incredible. Shikimi, you know what I mean, don't you?"

All I heard was a "hmph" from the other side of the room.

That mysterious (extraordinary monster who looked like a) short white-haired girl in Japanese clothing had refused to say a word.

However, she was not the type to hide it when she was displeased.

So did her silence mean she felt something comfortable enough to simply accept in silence?

Enbi, meanwhile, was growling at her sisters and cousins who were clinging to me from all sides, but she also spoke to me.

"So what are you going to do now that you've created a place for the Hishigami Women, detective?"

"Can I give a serious answer?"

"Maybe after you do something about this decidedly *not* serious harem scene! Did you steal someone's championship belt in some kind of ring, detective!?"

The Mystery Freak was quite furious, but I was already switching modes.

"I can't ignore the Hishigami Women who have slipped through the cracks of the world. Since they have these skills, I want them to use those for society's benefit. More importantly, it's definitely wrong that it's an accepted practice to kill them the instant they're born. …But on a more realistic level, it won't be easy finding all of them. I doubt even the power of the police will be enough to

protect them.”

“Enough setup. What exactly are you going to do?”

“I want to start with what I know. There is one Hishigami Woman I already know fairly well.”

“Wait. Hold on a second, detective! I, um, I seriously doubt that’s possible. I can’t even imagine my sister acting all lovestruck!!”

“I will save Hishigami Mai.”

I said it quickly.

I said it before my own resolve could dull.

“She’s violent, wicked, perfect, and hopeless, but so were the other Hishigami Women I’ve seen. And I’ve learned that the people most in need of saving are so cornered they’ve forgotten that they even want to be saved. And I can’t put this off any longer. So I want your help with this. I want to find that Hishigami Woman with the rusty blades in her eyes and face her once more.”

“Uheh,” groaned the Mystery Freak. “That’s fine,” she added. “But if you do pull off your dream of having the complete set, please don’t tell me you’re going to go for the Hishigami Men next. If you’re that indiscriminate, Enbi-chan is going to have to punch you.”

The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village - Bonus Track

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Hishigami (♀) All Stars Psychedelic Live!!

Author: **Kamachi Kazuma**

Illustrator: **Mahaya**

Translated by **Js06**

The original Japanese text can be found on the author's site.

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